

## Metaphysics and ontology

Dr Nikk Effingham discusses his research on metaphysics and ontology in the Department of Philosophy.

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Hi, I'm Nikk Effingham. I lecture in philosophy and my research mainly focuses on metaphysics, specifically an area called ontology.

Ontology is the study of what things exist. The way that this is differentiated from other disciplines - a lot of other disciplines try and find out what things exist - what animals are if you're a biologist, what sub-atomic particles are if you're a physicist. We're studying a lot broader questions about what things exist.

We're looking at more abstract questions like whether there are numbers or properties, that kind of thing. It can get quite down to earth. I have to admit some of these questions sound a bit odd - questions like whether there are properties and numbers. I much prefer dealing with questions about material objects and that's where the vast majority of my research focuses.

I look at questions of whether there's tables or chairs or planets or goats or mountains. The way to get a grip on why you might think that that's an issue is to imagine it's certainly the case that normally you think that tiny little things compose bigger things - the atoms in a table come to compose the table. The atoms in a chair come to compose the chair. My body particles come to compose me. But sometimes you think some things don't compose. For instance, take the cast of Dallas and all of the toilets in New York. We tend to think that there's not some kind of objects out there composed of all of these toilets and all of the cast of Dallas, these old 1980s soap opera actors. It just doesn't seem that there's an object out there that's composed of these things.

So sometimes we think that these things compose a material object and sometimes we don't. One of the questions I look at is when this goes on and whether it is a case that atoms really do compose tables like we intuitively think. Some reasons to think not or some reasons to think that something weird is going on is to imagine some different cultures and alien race maybe comes down and says 'Actually, tables, don't know what you're talking about, don't know what they are, that's just a bunch of atoms arranged in a certain way. There's no table composed in addition. The cast of Dallas and toilets in New York. Yeah, they compose, that's why we came here, that's why we've flown across the galaxy, to find that object that is composed of the cast of Dallas and the toilets in New York'. And they give it some random weird name, a girllet or something.

How are you going to explain to them that this girllet, this weird composite object doesn't exist? It just doesn't seem to be that this is the kind of thing that physics could find out. If you asked a physicist they could look very carefully at the cast of Dallas, they could look very carefully at the toilets of New York and they won't see some magic particles zip in when they come to compose an object as opposed to when they don't.

There's nothing physical about this table that's a dead giveaway that the atoms compose a table while the cast and the toilets compose nothing. So it seems to be an open question physics can't answer.

So, it's this kind of question that ontologists and myself are looking at. What material objects are out there? How does it tally with your common sense idea of the world? Are there tables? Or are they just atoms arranged in a certain way? Almost arranged table-wise but without composing a table.

They are the questions I'm looking at but I do like broader at these more abstract esoteric questions of whether there's numbers or properties. And of course, we look more broadly at questions of whether these questions make any sense - metametaphysics - meta ontology - the philosophy of ontology and asking whether in fact that people's gut reactions that these questions are all a load of nonsense and maybe they're right and these questions aren't valid at all. So that's what I look at.